



Dr. Gribble

## Dr. Florence Newberry Gribble

### MEMORIAL ADDRESS

Delivered at Dayton, O., By Dr. Alva J. McClain



Dr. McClain

It was in the year 1923, almost twenty years ago, that I stood in the pulpit of my church in Philadelphia and spoke in memory of James S. Gribble; for he was a member of that church, and I was his pastor. I think I can understand to some extent, therefore, the feeling of you people of the Dayton church and your pastor as we come this morning to speak in memory and honor of Dr. Florence Newberry Gribble, his wife, who held her membership in this church. While I do not recall the exact dates, I imagine that this relationship existed for at least twenty-five years.

Throughout the ordinary memorial service there quite often runs a note of sadness and the tragedy of irrevocable loss. But for us who as Christian believers understand the glorious truth of a Sovereign God, as Dr. Gribble understood it, there can be no such feeling. With such a God, there can be no accidents. We may make mistakes. God never does. It is not always given us to understand the mystery of His perfect will, nor to see clearly the final purpose which is often hid beneath the veil of His providential control. But God sees, and knows. And some day, we, too, shall understand, when faith is turned to sight.

I trust, therefore, that our service this morning shall be both a celebration and a memorial: the memorial of a life well lived, but also a celebration for the triumphant home-going of one who belonged to the family of God. Certainly, for Sister Gribble, to depart and be with Christ is very far better. No more loneliness; no more weariness of body; no more wracking fevers; no more tears, and no more death. But now ever with the Lord she loved and served. Yes, now reunited at last with James, with whom she served the Lord in Africa. Many of you here this morning will recall the memorable words written by James S. Gribble in one of his last letters to his wife: "I shall be content with the lowest seat in heaven," he wrote, "if only there I may sit and see the redeemed of the Lord come in from those fields where I have been a pioneer missionary." Well, now there is another who sits with him in glory, and watches the redeemed of Africa as they come in. Surely, there should be no tragic sorrow in our hearts this morning, but rather rejoicing and celebration.

Now it would be easy to take the time this morning with historic dates and events, for Dr. Gribble's service as a missionary to the Dark Continent was well filled with years and important events, covering a span of thirty years. With many of these events you are familiar, having read and studied them in her book "Undaunted Hope." Therefore, I shall not rehearse them this morning. After all, mere dates and events are not the most important things in human life. It is not when or how long we serve, but how well. It is not even how much we have done, but what we have become by the Grace of God, that really matters.

### I. IN A VERY REAL SENSE, THE DEATH OF DR. GRIBBLE HAS WRITTEN THE FINAL WORD IN THE FIRST GLORIOUS CHAPTER OF THE BRETHREN MISSION TO FRENCH EQUATORIAL AFRICA.

It is not subtracting in the least from the glory of others, who have labored and died in this great missionary field, to say that James S. and Dr. Florence Gribble were the founders of our mission there in the deepest sense of the word. On their hearts the Lord of the Harvest first laid the burden for this then untouched field. It was their eyes which first saw the vision of redeemed souls coming up to the Father's House from the vast Oubangui-Chari region. It was their unwavering faith which fired others to give money and life to this end. It was their unwearied service which over a period of nearly three years gave to our churches and pastors the information needed to stir us into definite action, and finally led to the adoption of this field as a new missionary project of the Brethren Church. The plan of the mission, its faith basis and constitution, the territory and tribes to be covered—all these were projects conceived and born in the hearts of James S. and Dr. Gribble.

If we count the years of preparation, then the first chapter of the Mission Oubangui-Chari extends from 1915 to 1942, a period of 27 years, over a quarter of a century. It was a period which began with the sacrificial death of James S. Gribble. And now it draws to a close with the departure of his wife. Of the original party that sailed from New Orleans on January 7th, 1913, only one member now remains—Miss Estella Meyers. All the others are now with the Lord who called and sent them forth.

During this first period of 27 years, Dr. Gribble lived to see many of their cherished dreams become a reality. She saw the land entered, the winning of the long battle for permission to preach the gospel, the founding of mission stations, the erection of good buildings, the going out of reinforcements, the reduction of the many grave hazards to health and life, the spread of a new and fruitful missionary zeal throughout the whole Church in the homeland. Best of all, she saw the founding of a native church, its growth in grace and numbers, and the training of a native ministry. True, Dr. Gribble lived to see the rise of serious problems and disappointments. But the triumphs were always greater than the defeats. It was a glorious and fruitful era.

But if she were here this morning, I am sure that she would tell you that the crowning blessing of these long years was the arrival on the field of her own daughter and son-in-law, Marguerite and Harold Dunning, to take up the work for which she and her husband have given themselves in life and in death. And when in the good Providence of God, she was permitted to hold in her arms the first and only granddaughter, born recently on the field, I can imagine her

feeling as Simeon of old: "Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace."

## II. THE MISSIONARY INFLUENCE OF DR. FLORENCE AND JAMES S. GRIBBLE IN THE BRETHREN CHURCH HAS BEEN FAR-REACHING AND PROFOUND.

The first actual foreign missionary project in the Brethren Church was launched in the year 1908, when Dr. and Mrs. C. F. Yoder went to South America. But outside of a very few men and churches, there was little genuine missionary zeal and sacrificial giving during the first few years. The denominational leadership was largely apathetic, the membership indifferent. The general conference officialdom was antagonistic. Sitting as a member of the foreign missionary board, there was at least one pastor who was actually opposed to the work of foreign missions! One has only to read the records of those lean years to see how pitifully small, outside of a few men, the missionary interest of the Brethren Church was.

Then suddenly in the years 1915 and 1916 a tremendous change began to sweep through the whole church. This movement manifested itself in several different ways: **First**, individual Christians sometimes entire congregations began to give themselves to prayer as they had never done before. **Second**, missionary giving began to spread and money poured in, so that for a brief time the Board had more money than missionaries to send out. **Third**, people began to offer their lives to missionary service, not merely young people, but some who were advanced in years. **Fourth**, the effects of all this dedication of life and money began to overflow into other channels. There was a revival of prayer and evangelism. Money began to come in for other than missionary interests. Pastors were better paid. Home missions began to profit. It is not too much to say that the years 1915-1917 marked the beginning of spiritual revolution in the Brethren Church.

Now what was it that happened in these years to bring about such a widespread change in the churches? Effects like these do not come without a cause. Well, it was in these years that Dr. Gribble and her husband were traveling among the churches of our denomination, seeking to arouse an interest in the founding of a mission to French Equatorial Africa. But even that statement does not explain just what happened. The members of the Brethren Church had been talked to about foreign missions before. You must know what the Gribbles did as they went from church to church. **First**, when they talked, they made you feel that here were two people who took the Word of God, and **ALL** of it, seriously. **Second**, they talked unceasingly about missionary responsibility, and they put it **FIRST**, as the Great Commission does, not second. **Third**, they asked nothing for themselves except prayer. It was a very simple program, but it worked: so astonishingly, in fact, that to this day some people have failed utterly to understand it. They regarded the Gribbles as slightly daft on the subject of prayer, and solemnly warned the Church about the danger of getting lop-sided on foreign missions. They failed to understand that once a church begins to take the Word of God seriously, sees clearly its missionary responsibility for a lost world, and gets down on its knees in prayer, all other problems will be solved.

The Brethren Church owes to the Lord a great debt of gratitude for the ministry of Florence and James Gribble. The more I consider and study the events of the past 30 years, the more I am inclined to feel that apart from their ministry and influence you cannot explain why, in our recent crisis, so many churches have stood fast for the gospel of God's Grace, and also why these same churches had the faith and courage to undertake the entire financial support for the total Brethren missionary program and personnel. And in what promises this year to be the largest missionary offering ever given by The Brethren

Church, we are being reminded once more of what the Gribbles never tired of telling us, that "with God all things are possible." It was **GOD**, I am sure, Who sent them into our midst to teach us the inseparable connection between prayer and missionary progress.

## III. ONE OF THE MOST IMPRESSIVE CHARACTERISTICS IN DR. GRIBBLE WAS HER ALMOST COMPLETE DEVOTION TO SUPER-MUNDANE AFFAIRS.

She was a spiritual Christian in the deepest sense of that term. Her first interest was always in the things of the Spirit. To feed upon the Word of God was more important to her than her necessary food. Amid the innumerable and almost endless tasks which fall to the lot of a pioneer missionary, her seasons of prayer were held inviolable. As a physician she ministered to thousands of diseased and broken bodies, but to the end her chief concern was for the souls of her patients. During the furloughs of her long missionary service, she was the guest in hundreds of homes here in the homeland, and I have yet to find a home where she did not bring spiritual blessing. This is the testimony of many who knew her intimately. Furthermore, her spirituality was no mere professional cloak, something to be put on or taken off as the occasion might require. It was perhaps the most genuine thing in her existence.

**Mere material things in themselves did not interest Dr. Gribble.** This trait led sometimes to a bit of impatience on the part of her friends. They wondered at her lack of interest in the ordinary material things which mean so much to the most of us. Some even thought she might be somewhat careless. But I think this was rather a **carefulness** for the things of the Lord, which to her were first. If she was not greatly concerned about the clothing that she wore, or the house she lived in, it was not because she did not appreciate these things, but rather that like Mary she had deliberately made her choice between essentials and non-essentials, a choice approved by the Lord Himself as that "good part" which shall not be taken away from her. As a member of the foreign board, I well remember her attitude toward money. If she had money, she proceeded to spend it for missionary needs, reasoning that her Heavenly Father was rich. If she had none, I never knew her to worry. She was always gracious and appreciative to the Board and the many who gave to support her work, but in the last analysis the provision of her daily needs was something between her and the Lord.

Now the astonishing thing is that such a person should ever have chosen for a career to minister to the human body as a medical missionary. Humanly speaking, knowing her inclinations, you might have supposed that almost any other type of missionary service would have suited her better. But here again, I would remind you, to Dr. Gribble the **will of God** was supreme. And it was **His will**, no mere personal preference, that led her to undertake the long and difficult preparation for the medical work. As one well taught in the Word of God, she knew, of course, that even the body of the saved is destined to share in the final destiny of the soul; that it belongs to the Lord, and will be fully redeemed at His coming. And so, there was something of both Mary and Martha in this great missionary of the Cross: as **Martha**, she ministered to the physical needs of men and women; but as **Mary**, she greatly preferred to sit at the feet of the Lord in Whose presence she is today.

## IV. AND THIS LEADS ME TO SUGGEST THAT HER PHYSICAL LIFE AND ENDURANCE WAS A MIRACLE OF GOD'S GRACE.

Even from the beginning of her ministry Dr. Gribble was somewhat frail physically. Then the first years of the mission were spent by our pioneer missionaries under circumstances almost unendurable. For two years they were compelled to wait by the government

at Brazzaville, a fever-infested region along the Congo River. There they had to live in tents with no adequate protection. Even after permission to advance was given, the inland journey was slow and tedious up another river where conditions were even worse. The hardships and hazards of those early years would have taxed the strongest body. There was scarcely a time that someone was not down with fever, and the care of the sick added to the many burdens of those who were well temporarily. All these experiences left their toll of weakness, and through the years of her service in Africa there were not many days when Dr. Gribble did not feel the weight of physical weakness and suffering.

**The foreign board, perhaps more than others, realized the growing frailty of her health.** We worried, I am sure, more than she did about the problem. Finally, at the close of the next to the last of her furloughs in the homeland, the Board felt that we could no longer assume the sole responsibility for returning her to the field. One physician declared that no board in its right mind would think of sending her back to Africa, to die, as he put the matter. And so, as some of you here this morning will recall, the Board finally decided to state the situation frankly to the members of the Society assembled at Winona Lake, and then ask for a vote as to whether she should be permitted to return to the field. The vote was unanimous to let her go back. I do not think there was ever any doubt in her mind as to the outcome. During all the argument and discussion, while the members of our Board were struggling with the dilemma—whether to "act like sensible men" and keep her at home, or walk by faith and send her back—Dr. Gribble sat and calmly smiled. She had committed the matter to God, and had no misgivings as to what would happen. After the unanimous vote by the members of F.M.S., she went back to Africa and confounded the doctors by living to serve the Lord another ten years. During those final years, she was pretty much a privileged character. When she came home on the last furlough, as I recall, the Board went through the formality of a medical examination, but no one paid much attention to it.

**Yet through all this physical infirmity and weakness, as most of you know, Dr. Gribble managed to get an astonishing amount of work done.** Besides the literally unending procession of patients demanding daily attention from both her and the hard working nurses who assisted her, she found time and strength for evangelistic duties, even going out into the "bush" at times to reach the tribes and villages. Furthermore, in her spare moments she found time to write the book which is so well known to members of the Brethren Church, and also to prepare a second manuscript for its sequel, to say nothing about the innumerable articles prepared for publication in the literature and magazines of the church at home.

**You cannot explain a life like this apart from the supernatural power of that Lord Who once said to the greatest of all missionaries, "My grace is sufficient for thee; for My strength is made perfect in weakness."** And I think that Dr. Gribble had learned to say, "Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me . . . for when I am weak, then am I strong" (2 Cor. 12:9-10).

#### **V. THERE WAS MANIFESTED IN THE LIFE OF DR. GRIBBLE A VERY BEAUTIFUL AND HARMONIOUS BLENDING OF THOSE VIRTUES WHICH ARE MOST TRULY CHRISTIAN.**

**Take, for example, graciousness and firmness.** It is not easy to put these two virtues together in perfect harmony. Graciousness very easily becomes ingratiating, the weakness of trying to please everybody. And a firm and uncompromising stand may easily become

mere opinionated stubbornness. But in Dr. Gribble these two virtues dwelt together about as harmoniously as is possible in mortal flesh. Those who knew her were always impressed by her personal practice of the grace of God. Even when utterly worn out with her deputation ministry among the churches, when body and mind were crying for quietness and rest, I have seen her go on talking with the member of some home in which she was being entertained, just because she wanted to be gracious. (And this leads me to remark parenthetically that we need to learn how to treat our missionaries when they come into our churches on furlough. Sometimes, inadvertently, we mistreat them.)

**But Dr. Gribble could also be firm in things that mattered.** On the great truths of the Word of God, in the matter of vital missionary principles, on the right of the missionary to witness for Christ anywhere and at any time—in such things her stand was completely uncompromising. Some of the French officials in Africa could tell some stories on this point. She simply smiled at them, made no promises, and then did as she pleased. But even in her moments of firmness, her graciousness never wholly failed. Once the Board came to a disagreement with her over the interpretation of the "faith policy" of the African mission. According to that policy, if gifts specially designated personally to any missionary did not reach \$350 in a year, the Board was to forward to the missionary enough from the General Fund to make up that amount, if there were sufficient money in that fund. But both Dr. Gribble and her husband came to feel that they should not accept any money at all from the General Fund, no matter how short their personal gifts came. The Board did not feel it would be wise to permit this exception, lest other missionaries might be led unwisely to take the same stand, and chose me as a committee of one to convince her that we were right. **Well, I did not succeed!** But I shall never forget how graciously she listened to all my carefully formulated arguments. Never an unkind word, nor any appearance of resentment. Finally, she agreed to accept the money, but we found out later that she gave it away for other missionary needs on the field!

**It is hardly necessary for me to point out to a Brethren audience that Dr. Gribble intellectually was a very unusual person.** And she had the selfpossession and poise that generally go with a high degree of conscious intelligence. As a member of the foreign board, I always enjoyed the sometimes lengthy conferences when she met with us on furlough. Her reports from the field, her aptness in phrasing an opinion, the clarity of her perception, her grasp of difficult problems—all witnessed to the keenness of her mind. As some of you may know, the foreign board has among its members some who enjoy a bit of humor at the end of our sometimes long and difficult sessions, even at the expense of a missionary who might be present. But Dr. Gribble, I recall, was always able to take care of herself nicely in any exchange of wit. And sometimes the joker found his joke deftly turned back upon his own head. The members of the Board had a decided respect for her intellectual ability.

**But along with her great ability there dwelt a very beautiful spirit of humility.** She had come to reflect in her own life and action that "humbleness of mind" which is the mark of those who have dwelt much in the secret place of the Most High. When missionary reinforcements failed to arrive, for whom she had prayed so earnestly while in Capetown not long ago, no word of complaint passed her lips. There was no suggestion that perhaps the Board or the missionaries had failed. On the contrary she wrote in her Prayer Band Letter for August of last year as follows: "The last human obstacle had been removed. These (other) missionaries were going through their field to their own. Yet there were none for our field, nor had a single American missionary of any society entered

Oubangui-Chari to labor there since before the war." And then she adds humbly, "I must search my own heart."—I have often wondered what would happen if, when things were going wrong in our Christian work, every member of the church, every member of the official board, every Sunday School teacher, every member of the choir, and the pastor, would begin to say, "I must search my own heart!" I am sure that no power on earth could halt the advance of a church like that.

#### VI. THIS BRIEF AND INADEQUATE REVIEW OF DR. GRIBBLE'S LIFE AND SERVICE SHOULD NOT BE CLOSED WITHOUT SOME REFERENCE TO THE RARE QUALITY OF HER CHRISTIAN COURAGE.

Many of you who have followed her missionary career through the years, who have read her writings and her book, will know something of the things she was called upon to face in the early years of the Mission. There were dangers and hazards on every hand: dangers of the sea; dangers from storm and rain with little shelter; dangers from the deadly disease-carrying insects of the tropical zone; dangers in flimsy boats on the African rivers; dangers from the wild beasts; dangers from the savage cannibals in the bush. All these dangers were shared equally by her husband and Miss Estella Myers. But there was one thing that only Dr. Gribble could experience, and that was the fear of a mother for her only child while passing through these perils of land and sea.

Many times during the years as a physician she had seen death in its most brutal and violent forms. But these were not the most difficult experiences. In 1919 she ministered at the final sickness of Mrs. Rollier, missionary mother of two children, and saw her buried in a lonely spot of the river at Ikelemba. In 1920 another member of the pioneer party, Miss Myrtle Snyder, member of the Dayton church, died at Inkongo. In 1923 with her own hands she had nursed Allen Lee Bennett for the last ten days of his brief lifetime, and then saw him die in a miserable little rest house at Gazeli. Only six months later she ministered to her own husband through the dreadful agonies of the black-water fever which closed his ministry on earth.

Now death, as I have pointed out in my treatment of the 23rd Psalm, is the acid test of all human values. "In the great literature of the world death figures as the last sombre enigma, before which man halts in dumb anguish or proud defiance, resenting its approach as that of a cruel and unnatural intruder, even when it closes a long and happy life. Contemplated at this angle, which is that of the vast majority of the human race, death is the focus of tragedy, the one incalculable woe . . . a reality so towering that shelter from it can be found in neither words nor silence." This is the viewpoint of the world and even some who profess to be Christians.

It was not the viewpoint of Dr. Florence Newberry Gribble. She has faced the "Last Enemy" calmly and unafraid. She asked for no shelter save the shelter of Him Who died and rose again. Beneath the shelter of His wings she found that peace which is beyond human understanding, and Christian courage to take up the burdens laid down by her fellowmissionaries and beloved husband in death. As a symbol of her faith and courage, she has left with us some verses which speak for those who had gone out across the bar.

God's magnetism is such that it can change a man from a weather-vane into a compass needle.

SCANDAL is the shortest distance between two evil minds.

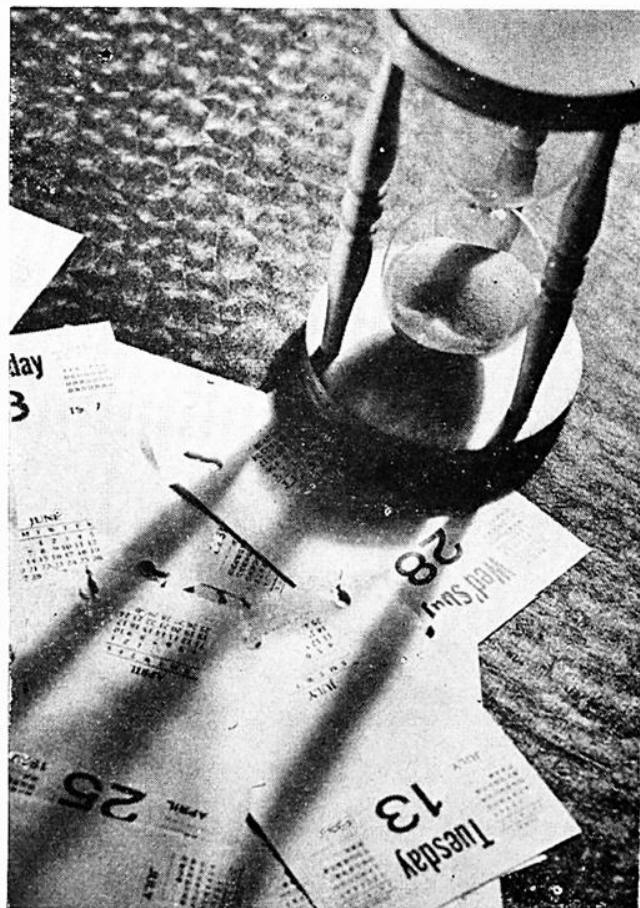
Each had a rendezvous with death  
At such a time as each knew not  
Where earthly hope and strength doth fade  
And countless spirits fill the air;  
Each had a rendezvous with death  
That heathen tribes might know God's care.

'Twas He, our Lord, who took each hand  
And led each one to Beulah Land  
And, disclosed, as we quenched the breath,  
A vision of Himself: His will  
That each a rendezvous with death  
Should have on Africa's plain or hill,  
When finished was life's span so dear  
And the glorious hopes of heaven were clear.

God knows, 'twere better to be deep  
Engrossed in toil and sacrifice  
Where love throbs out her pains than weep  
For loved ones gone before in death;  
Each had a rendezvous with death  
At the disputed barricade  
Till Jesus' call came clear and pure.  
Let us to our pledged word be true  
And fail not in our rendezvous.

It isn't what you have in your pocket that makes you thankful, but what you have in your heart.

The Christian's life is the world's Bible!



"Today, if ye will hear His voice, harden not your hearts"—(Heb. 4:7). "Boast not thyself of tomorrow; for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth"—(Prov. 27:1).